

Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau became independent in 1973 after a prolonged guerilla war that led the way for the liberation of [African Lusophone countries](#) and the [Carnation Revolution](#) in Portugal in 1974. The constitution of 1984, revised in 1991, put an end to '[democratic socialism](#)' and the socialist one party state. First pluralist multi-party elections in 1994 only reinforced the rule of president [Viera](#) and his former unity party. Once hailed as role model of progressive African development the country subsequently degenerated into a rentier state, marked by aid dependency, militarization, nepotism and corruption. Members of the power elite became deeply involved in weapon and drug trafficking. Finally, Guinea-Bissau arguably turned into the first '[narco-state](#)' in Africa.

[Guinea-Bissau](#), a former Portuguese colony, is situated at the West African coast, bordering to Senegal in the North and Guinea (Conakry) in the South. With a surface of just 36,125 sq km and a population of 1.75m inhabitants it is one of the smallest and poorest countries worldwide. However, its historic and geo-political significance by far surpasses its geographical size. It was here, where in 1446 the Portuguese started to construct their colonial empire. And again it was in the former Portuguese Guinea that a fierce guerilla warfare (1963-1973) contributed to the demise of Portuguese colonialism under the Salazar dictatorship and its aftermath in Lisbon up to 1974. The independence movement African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde ([Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde](#), PAIGC) founded in 1956 was led over decades by the renowned Cape Verdian revolutionary [Amílcar Cabral](#) (murdered in 1973). Cabral was a well-respected charismatic leader and member of the [Socialist International](#), backed by China, former Eastern Bloc countries as well as non-aligned states. His writings on African critical theory ([Cabralism](#)) had a strong impact on the strategic orientation of the guerilla war and the early stages of national reconstruction ([reconstrução nacional](#)) of Guinea Bissau up to the 1980s. According to Cabral, a transitional phase of 'revolutionary nationalism', backed by 'revolutionary humanism' would be needed in order to bridge the cleavages between colonialism and imperialism on the one hand and the supposed glorious future of the new human (*homem novo*) to be created, guided by [African democratic socialism](#).

The National Assembly of PAIGC declared its independence on 24 September 1973 unilaterally. Its leader, [Luís de Almeida Cabral](#), a half-brother of the murdered Amílcar, became the first president of independent Guinea-Bissau on 10 September 1974. Economic crisis, food shortages and cleavages between the '[Cape Verdians](#)' and 'truly Africans' within the elite of the PAIGC led to the military coup of the Prime Minister, former armed forces commander and PAIGC veteran [João Bernardo Vieira](#) (called "Nino") on 14 November 1980. Cape Verdian hopes of unity with Guinea-Bissau were dashed finally. Viera propagated a Guinean-African identity and tried to install a socialist command economy, directed by a military-civilian government under a Revolutionary Council that led the country as a single-party state until 1994.

The ‘[second wind of change](#)’ in Africa (referring to the first wind of independence) in the wake of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc brought first steps of economic and political liberalization and a stimulus for democratization in Guinea-Bissau. Constitutional amendments in 1991 put an end to the socialist unity system enshrined in the 1984 constitution. The Democratic Front of [Aristide Menezes](#) became the first legal opposition party. Other political parties followed suite, representing either the urban middle class or important ethnic groups, notably the [Balanta](#), that had strong roots in the army and formed the base of the Social Renewal Party (*Partido da Renovação Social*, PRS) led by the Balanta [Koumba Yalá](#).

First pluralist multi-party elections (presidential and legislative, 7 August 1994) confirmed the lasting popularity of leading veterans ([antigos combatentes](#)) of the liberation war, notably of the incumbent Viera and his PAIGC. However, excessive corruption and patronage as well as involvement of the commanding heights of the government and army in weapon trafficking with the separatist movement in neighboring [Casamance](#) (Senegal) resulted in a ferocious civil war (1998-99) and the subsequent collapse of the Veira-regime in May 1999.

An UN Peace-building Support Office in Guinea Bissau ([UNOGBIS](#), deployed since June 1999, later-on assisted by ECOWAS and Angolan peace corps) tried to maintain a fragile peace. The short interregnum of a transitional Government under interim President [Malam Bacai Sanhá](#) (PAIGC) was followed by presidential elections in early 2000 won by Kumba Yalà (PRS) who became the new president. A second military coup d'état in 2003 resulted in a transitional Government of interim President [Henrique Rosa](#) from 2003 to 2005 and subsequently in the third legislative and fourth presidential multiparty elections of 2005 won again by “Nino” Vieira who had returned from exile. His PAIGC gained again a comfortable majority in parliament in 2008. However, in the aftermath of bitter disputes within the ruling circles of the army, presumably about trafficking, Vieira was killed in a savage coup on 2 March 2009 by renegade soldiers after accusations of masterminding the assassination Vieira’s long-standing adversary, the Chief of General Staff [Tagme Na Waie](#) only hours before.

Early presidential elections in June 2009 were won by [Malam Bacai Sanhá](#) (PAIGC). He died in office on 9 January 2012 as a result of an illness. Nevertheless, also his government had been threatened by an attempted coup in December 2011, this time against Prime Minister [Carlos Gomes Junior](#) and the Chief of General Staff, [General António Indjai](#). A third military coup d'état after the death of Sanhá prevented the installation of a democratically elected government when the army intervened again to prevent former Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Jr (PAIGC) to win the run-off against the Balanta Kumba Yalà (PRS) in April 2012. Instead a military regime was installed which gave way after a prolonged political crisis under pressure of the international community to a transitional Government with interim President [Manuel Serifo Nhamadjo](#) (PAIGC) in May 2013. Sixth multiparty elections (presidential and legislative) in May 2014 resulted in the outright victory of former finance minister [Jose Mario Vaz](#) (PAIGC). Whether his government will be able to overcome endemic state fragility remains to be seen.

Concepts of 'democratization by elections', backed by substantial aid of the donor community apparently failed. They were ill-adapted to the local conditions, based too much on sweeping generalizations and essentialism. According to its constitution (1996) Guinea-Bissau should be a republican democracy with a semi-presidential political system. Actually the country belongs to the most [fragile states](#) worldwide since decades. Five coups since 1980 meant that no elected president served his full term. State power does not extend to the whole territory. Notably in rural areas, customary law and institutions like traditional chiefs ([regulo](#)) still

prevail. Constitutional checks and balances are not guaranteed. Endemic corruption and impunity reigns in the public service, including the judiciary. Major structural problems like the oversized army, the undue influence of the military on politics and aid dependency are still to be solved.

Dirk Kohnert

GIGA - German Institute of Global and Area Studies

See Also: [Cape Verde](#), [Democracy Assistance/Aid](#), [Military Junta](#), [Portugal](#), Rentier States

Further Readings

Embaló , B. “[Civil–military relations and political order in Guinea-Bissau](#). ” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, v.50/2 (2012)

Kohnert, D.. “[Democratization via elections in an African 'narco state'? The case of Guinea Bissau](#)”. *GIGA-WP*, No. 123 (2010)

Rudebeck, L.: "[Electoral democratisation in post-civil war Guinea-Bissau 1999-2008](#)." *Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, DP* No. 66 (2011)